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## ABSTRACT

The French worker certification system is focusing on efforts to design a scheme for the accreditation of work-based learning. If implemented, the scheme would be directed by a business-government-worker partnership, recognized and accepted by different occupations, and accessible to all employees regardless of the way their qualifications were acquired. Applicable to a labor market characterized by discontinuous work experiences and precarious employment conditions, such a mechanism would permit worker mobility between jobs and complement the traditional certification regime. Important issues in this effort include: (1) developing standards according to common rules to allow comparison between occupations; (2) establishing student evaluation using multiple forms, such as combining one or more of interview, test, observation and simulation; and (3) structuring qualifications to demonstrate mastery of an occupation or elements of multiple occupations to help create individual career paths. (Sidebars discuss findings of an original research study upon which the scheme is based and general certification practices in various French industries.) (AJ)

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# Training & Employment

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM CEREQ AND ITS ASSOCIATED CENTRES

## THE ACCREDITATION OF QUALIFICATIONS IN FRANCE What Role for Joint Inter-Occupational Supervision?

*Is it possible to design a scheme for the accreditation of qualifications which, based on the recognition of the training dimension of work, would be jointly supervised by labour and management, open to all salaried employees and broadly recognised by the occupational branches? In the face of a labour market characterised by discontinuous work experiences and precarious employment conditions, such a mechanism would permit mobilities between activity sectors to be efficiently managed in a wider context than that of the certifications presently issued by the branches. What place could such a programme occupy within the French certification system?*

Over the past decade, public authorities and the social partners have attempted various approaches to the accreditation of qualifications. The discussion underway within the French employers confederation (Mouvement des entreprises de France, MEDEF) on the feasibility of a joint inter-occupational scheme for the accreditation of qualifications marks a recent effort in this area (see Box page 2).

The recognition of the training dimension of work as a means of access to diplomas and certificates constitutes the main thrust of actions undertaken by public authorities. The 1992 law on the accreditation of work experience, mainly used to obtain diplomas issued by the national education system, and experiments with vocational competence certificates (*certificats de compétences professionnelles*, CCP) launched in 1997 by the Ministry of Employment and Solidarity, thus opened another path for access to certification. Most recently, the 'accreditation of experience' (*validation des acquis*) section of the law on social modernisation of 17 January 2002 was aimed at giving new impetus to this approach.

In parallel, the social partners, aware of the stakes involved in the changing nature of qualifications, have entered the field of vocational training supply. A 1984 law thus gave the occupational branches' National Joint Committees on Employment (*commissions paritaires nationales de l'emploi*, CPNE) the possibility of accrediting qualifications

defined as having priority for the companies in the sector. The vocational qualification certificates (*certificats de qualification professionnelle*, CQP) which were set up in this context thus entail the elaboration of activity standards which, in general, reflect the desire to dissociate certification from training.

These different approaches have all, in some way, constituted collective responses to the shortcomings of job management practices and later, those of competence management, which were developed inside the companies in the 1980s. The tools elaborated in the context of forward-looking job and competence management (*gestion prévisionnelle des emplois et des compétences*, GPEC) were only implemented in the large concerns, mainly in industry. In 1998, the MEDEF, expressing the desire to generalise these practices to all companies, asserted the latter's responsibility for the evaluation of competences. However, the latest inter-occupational negotiations have demonstrated a reorientation of this position towards the need for collective supervision of evaluation and accreditation practices.

Post-Taylorist representations of work, reflected in the competence approaches but already present in GPEC, break with the rationale of individual job stations and thus with the logic—traditional in French companies—of career advancement by seniority. Such a change raises the

question of the role of professional mobility in the definition of qualification when that mobility does not depend on promotion. In this context, the increasing involvement of the occupational branches in the area of accreditation of qualifications is helping to define new collective references for supervising professional mobility (taken as the whole of the transitions possible within one company, one sector or between sectors). At the same time, employees are provided with tools allowing them to manage their career paths in the face of transformations in the labour market.

## THE ISSUES AT STAKE

The companies' present preoccupations in the area of mobility are multiple. Recruitment and development of workforce loyalty, career development or advancement and required conversion into other activity sectors are all forms of mobility which are only partly served by the tools the companies have set up, mainly for internal use. In the case of inter-sectoral mobility in particular, they have few points of reference for the labour market, since existing certifications rarely specify the abilities needed to go from one sector to another.

A joint inter-occupational scheme for the accreditation of qualifications could permit the validity of the certifications issued to be extended beyond the boundaries of each of the sectors, thus making it possible to organise crossovers between occupations in different sectors. At the same time, by giving branch players a methodological strategy, it could encourage the spread of the CQPs and thus make them more visible on the labour market. One essential question remains, however: the choice of methods for defining both the standards and means of accreditation. Indeed, if such a scheme is to work, this choice of methods must be respected by all the branch players involved in its implementation.

The proliferation of standards—for 'occupations', 'jobs', 'competences' and so on—reflects the need, shared by the world of business and training alike, to revise the representations of work in order to adapt to what is

perceived as a constantly changing reality. But this proliferation also reflects existing divisions over the interpretation of social changes or methodological choices. One of the stumbling blocks stems from the fact that the tools elaborated to accredit past experience sometimes unwittingly give an abstract vision of the human intervention, fragmented into units of measurement—competences—which can be isolated from each other. No attempt at creating procedures to encourage the spread of the accreditation of experience is shielded from this reification of work. Reinforcing the role of labour and management in the accreditation of qualifications requires overcoming this risk and choosing principles which can be adopted by participants with a variety of interests.

## COMMON STANDARDS FOR MULTIPLE EVALUATIONS

The homogenisation of the 'occupations' standards which are supposed to provide tools for the scheme could constitute a first step in this necessary harmonisation. Such standards would be elaborated according to common rules, regardless of activity sectors and qualification levels, so as to allow a comparison of occupations. The rules would be based on an interpretative grid aimed less at bringing out what individuals do and know than understanding how they function, in other words, how they react to different situations confronting them. The 'occupations' standards would thus attest to the mastery of activities but also to the individual's ability to transpose the resources used for these activities to new situations. It is important that this guideline reflect the trade-offs made by the individual in face of the different constraints proper to the larger context, such as productivity, teamwork, organisation or security. The standard would thus permit a typology of work situations allowing the identification of similarities between activities or occupations.

The pertinence of the accreditation scheme also depends on its ability to take into account the difficulties individuals may encounter at the time of the evaluation in function of

## FEASIBILITY STUDY OF AN ACCREDITATION SCHEME

The Céreq study on which this article is based was undertaken following a request from the MEDEF on the feasibility of a scheme for the accreditation of occupational qualifications which would be directed by the social partners and which would be accessible to all salaried employee regardless of the way their qualifications have been acquired. On the basis of this request, Céreq formulated a two-part interrogation: How to formalise competences which might be subject to recognition? How to accredit these competences?

In order to respond to these questions, a study was initiated in 2002 in six occupational branches—insurance, textiles, temporary work, retail food distribution, chemicals and personal services—which have very different practices in the area of accreditation of qualifications. The objective of this study is to seek common denominators within these practices in terms of standards on the one hand and accreditation on the other.

• *Standards*: on the basis of a cumulative comparative analysis of existing standards, this line of investigation permitted the elaboration of seven "occupation" standards. These describe very different

occupations—from industry and services, supervisory and operating staff—according to a single grid structured by fields of activity and types of situations. This analysis permits a uniform reading of work activities and an assessment of the possibilities of establishing connections between occupations in different activity sectors.

• *Accreditation*: this research analyses branch practices concerning the recognition of qualifications on the basis of surveys carried out among branch players, company management (directors, human resources supervisors, training officers) and branch training bodies. It shows the great diversity of evaluation and certification practices, which reflects, among others, a very disparate interest in inter-sectoral mobility. Furthermore, innovative accreditation schemes instituted by certain branches, such as textiles or retail food distribution, demonstrate a concern for not placing the individuals involved in an exam-like situation and for diversifying the forms of evaluation (interview, test, simulation, on-the-job observation) in order to grasp the reality of the work as clearly as possible.



their profile and the content of their activities. To this end, it could be based on a 'multi-form evaluation' allowing adjustments between the standard intended to reflect the essence of an occupation and the concrete situations arising in the work context. In order to avoid any spectre of the examination, the procedure would involve combining the two or three forms of evaluation deemed most appropriate—interview, test, observation, simulation, written application—in function of the public, but also the objectives of the accreditation, which may be aimed at in-company, intra- or inter-sectoral mobility. This principle, which has already been tested in the textile branch with 'Modular Qualifying Paths' (*Parcours modulaires qualifiants*), would seem to lend itself to other activity sectors as well. Left to the appreciation of labour and management, the choice of the different forms of evaluation would then open a wide range of possibilities for the evaluation of professional knowledge between the two poles of description and demonstration.

### AN OPPORTUNITY FOR STRUCTURING CAREER PATHS

Rather than presenting the occupation as a rigid framework with airtight boundaries, the structuring by activities and types of situations would permit the identification of possible career paths both inside and outside the given occupation. Indeed, an individual can, for a variety of reasons, wish to accredit his or her qualification without targeting a given occupation as is the case, for example, with beginners or those who work in a company encouraging versatility by making them intervene in a variety of occupational fields, or those seeking accreditation for bodies of knowledge which have no intrinsic link between them because they are used in both professional and private life. A joint inter-occupational scheme could thus respond to two kinds of needs:

- The accreditation of a qualification corresponding to the overall mastery of an occupation. This is the prevailing configuration in the attribution procedure for the CQP.

- The accreditation of elements of qualification corresponding to the mastery of fields of activity related to different occupations. In this second case, the accreditation would attest to the mastery of fields of activity linked to several occupations and would bring out the adaptability of an individual going from one register to another. In addition, accrediting this asset would compensate for the lack of visibility of qualifications associated with different occupations (see diagram below).

Thus, a large concern aware of the fact that it often seeks this kind of itinerary and seeking to provide its employees with qualifications highlighting their versatility could, through the intermediary of the branches concerned, opt for the joint scheme. Collective control would thus favour the structuring of career paths which do not fit into the present system of branch qualifications.

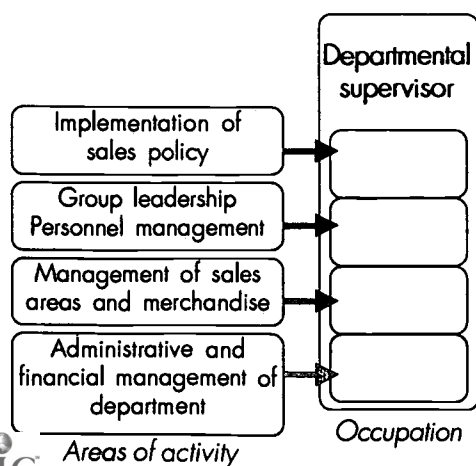
### REVISING THE NOTION OF OCCUPATION

If a system of joint accreditation of qualifications provides an opportunity to develop a conception of the occupation which is more closely based on real work, it should be kept in mind that the occupation is not simply a professional point of reference but also an essential element of personal identity emerging from a social construction which, through collective recognition, gives it all its value. The accreditation of qualifications cannot be limited to the identification of productive capabilities; it must also attest to an individual's value in a context larger than that of the activity sector alone.

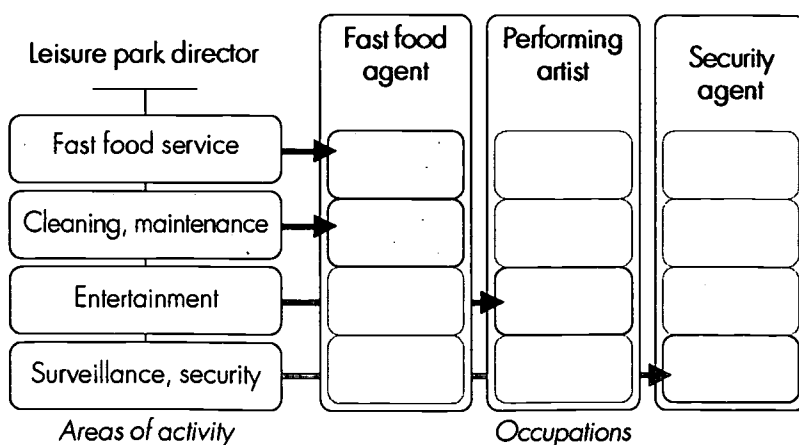
The occupation remains a powerful referent for the occupational branches, the companies and employees, as well as young people faced with the choice of their future programmes of study; it thus serves as a motivating factor and provides the main rallying point for labour and management to establish their dialogue in the CPNEs. A revised definition of occupation, referring to real work and conceived as an open, flexible space, could become the subject of a compromise among social partners set on

#### AN ACCREDITATION SCHEME FOR TWO TYPES OF NEEDS

- Accrediting a qualification corresponding to overall mastery of an occupation



- Accrediting elements of qualification corresponding to the mastery of activities associated with several occupations



Source: Céreq, 2001.



intervening more actively in qualification policies, within one branch or a group of branches.

Joint inter-occupational accreditation, as a complement to existing schemes, could contribute to two objectives:

- By proposing the accreditation not of certifications—but to levels and specialisations—but of occupational qualifications—associated with occupations or work activities likely to be linked from one sector to another—it offers greater readability, and thus greater fluidity, to a labour market open to inter-sectoral mobility at all qualification levels.
- By attributing a function of social recognition of qualification to labour and management, in parallel to public programmes, it suggests that the labour market can be controlled 'on the spot' by the participants themselves, with qualifications which are at once occupational (thus specific) and national (thus general).

Insofar as they permit more fine-tuned adjustments of individual competences to company needs, the CQPs were initially conceived as tools complementing national certificates and diplomas. Functioning as a kind of enlargement of the CQP mechanism, the joint inter-occupational accreditation of qualifications could likewise take its place within France's certification system—on the condition that there is a continuity between joint accreditation and public certifications. This complementarity of the different accreditation mechanisms would provide a guarantee that career paths are 'insured' by qualifications set up within a framework larger than that of the branch alone.

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### ACCREDITATION OF QUALIFICATIONS: VARIED BRANCH PRACTICES

Since 1984, and especially since an inter-occupational agreement of 1991, continuing training has become an important issue in collective bargaining at branch level. With the Vocational Qualification Certificates (CQP), which still represent only 1 percent of the total certifications granted each year, labour and management, operating within the context of the National Joint Committees on Employment (CPNE) now have the possibility of defining the content of priority training programmes for their sectors. While the CNPEs are quite active in certain branches, such as retail food distribution or chemicals, they are not overly solicited elsewhere. Furthermore, in emerging branches which are not yet well structured, such as personal services, the absence of a CNPE prevents any action in the area of accreditation of qualifications. And the participants in the CNPEs, who have until now been little involved in the definition of training content, often do not have sufficient expertise to develop qualification and accreditation standards.

The history of the relations of each occupational branch with the national education system, as well as with the National Association for Adult Vocational Training (Association Nationale pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes, AFPA), also shapes practices in the area of accreditation of qualifications, which are most often complementary to public certifications. Over the past decade, all the vocational

advisory committees (*commissions consultative professionnelles*, CPC) have undertaken measures of greater or lesser scope aimed at reviewing titles and diplomas in function of the changes in occupations themselves. Many branches, moreover, have tested public schemes for the accreditation of work experience. Within this framework, some of them, such as retail food distribution or chemicals, have chosen to develop branch certifications, while others, such as textiles or temporary work, have preferred the public certifications.

This spectrum of certification practices reflects the diversity of the issues involved in job mobility. In retail food distribution, but also in chemicals and insurance, branch certification is aimed at responding to the demands of intra-sectoral mobility and, depending on the case, permits the attraction of young people into the sector, the development of employee loyalty or career management. For the branches which have chosen to privilege public certifications, the objective is rather to encourage the inter-sectoral mobility of employees. Thus, in textiles, where the internationalisation of production has resulted in massive job cutbacks, the diploma is aimed at anticipating the conversion of employees to other industries. Similarly, in temporary work, measures undertaken to favour access to public certifications allow national recognition of competences acquired by temporary workers in the course of their different assignments.

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